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ABSTRACT

Students with learning disabilities (LD) are now enrolling more frequently in higher education programs. This paper reviews the needs of college students with LD, the roles various school staff members can play in preparing students with LD to meet the demands of college, resources useful in preparing students for transition, and transition of students from secondary to postsecondary programs in rural areas. The skills needed for LD students to experience success in college are in the areas of academic skills, social skills, self-esteem, and self-help. An appropriate starting point for successful transition planning is an honest assessment by the student, parents, and teachers concerning these four skill areas. With the help of parents and counselors, LD students interested in college should discuss the demands of college, enroll in as many regular education classes as possible, internalize coping skills, and investigate programs at local colleges and universities. Helpful resources include a curriculum for transition to college, an educational planning strategy, support organizations, and various books. In rural settings, teachers generally have ample knowledge of family characteristics and resources and a more holistic view of their students. Disadvantages of transition in rural areas include a lack of awareness of opportunities, and less variety in high school course selection. (KS)

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COLLEGE AS A TRANSITION OPTION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

General findings cited by Biller (1987) show education to be the primary determinant of occupational status. Biller notes that success in school shapes an individual's aspirations and subsequent attendance in college.

Until recent years, there has been a general lack of college programs available toward which students with learning disabilities (LD) could set their goals. Students with LD have traditionally selected to transition into vocational options not requiring college training (e.g., mechanic, cosmetology, electronics, plumbing) (Shaw, Norlander & McGuire, 1987). Several factors have contributed to students with LD not pursuing college as a postsecondary option. These factors include: perceptions of students and their families that college was nonessential; concerns of students their families and teachers that students would not be successful in college and lack of awareness of how to access services available to students in postsecondary institutions.

Students with LD are now enrolling more frequently in higher education programs (Dowdy, Carter & Smith). Hartman, Krulwich and Hippolitus (cited in Mangrum & Strichart, 1988) have attributed the increased participation of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education to four factors. First, there has been an improvement in the identification and assessment process. Second, appropriate provisions have been made for students with LD in elementary and secondary schools; therefore, they are better prepared for college. The third factor suggests that those students with LD, who had been provided an education resulting from provisions of PL 94-142, are now of college age. Finally, there is an increase in the awareness among postsecondary institutions that students with LD can succeed in college given the necessary support.

Despite these increases, many students with LD often do not consider college as an option. Those that do enter postsecondary education programs frequently encounter personnel lacking knowledge about accommodating disabilities (Putnam, 1984). This paper will review

the needs of college students with LD, the skills needed by high school students preparing to enter college, the roles various school staff members can play in preparing students with LD to meet the demands of college, resources useful in preparing students for transition, and transition of students from secondary to postsecondary programs in rural areas.

Needs of College Students with LD

A review of current literature on preparing students with LD for college indicates a number of skills needed for success. These skills may be grouped into four main areas: academic, social, emotional/self-esteem, and self-help/survival (Hildreth, Dixon, Heflin, Frerichs, in press). Miller, Snider and Rzonca (1990) investigated variables related to successful participation in postsecondary education for students with LD. They found factors that significantly related were cognitive abilities, reading achievement levels (e.g., academic areas), participation in extracurricular activities (e.g., emotional/self-esteem and social areas), and utilization of vocational rehabilitation personnel (e.g., self-help/survival areas).

Academic skills consist of basics in reading, writing and mathematics in addition to being able to process information in an effective manner. Social skills center around a student's ability to interact with others; this includes teachers and authority figures as well as peers. Emotional and self-esteem skills focus on evaluating one's strengths and weaknesses. Students need to be able to effectively understand themselves in order to set appropriate and realistic goals. Self-help and survival skills are also needed to ensure success in academic settings. Students with LD need to be able to attend class regularly and on time. They should also be able to complete assignments without high levels of stress, turn completed assignments in on time, budget their time effectively, and advocate for themselves as individuals with disabilities.

The general assumption has been that college students with LD are very much like their school-aged counterparts. However, research has supported that the student with LD does change in character as he or she matures and that the change in environment creates a different set of needs (Ryan & Heikkila, 1988). Both secondary and postsecondary staff who want to support student with LD should avoid the stereotypes generalized from research on children with LD, while still recognizing that some problems such as information processing may continue (Aksamit, Morris & Leuenberger, 1987).

While some changes occur with maturity, academic problems that continue to hamper the college student with LD include severe underachievement, problems with automaticity, poor comprehension, perceptual confusion, and short attention span. Processing skills, study skills, difficulty with organization of time and use of reference materials persist as areas of difficulty. Additionally, students with LD were noted to exhibit poor self-concept, social immaturity, and inadequacy in social situations (Putnam, 1984). These findings support the need for continued special services at the postsecondary level to aid students with LD. More comprehensive planning and preparation at the secondary level will contribute to success in college.

Role of School Staff in Skill Development

Various researchers have addressed preparing student with LD to leave high school and enter postsecondary settings. Biller (1985) investigated the understanding of career development of adolescents with LD. He found that career readiness skills were not well developed. In general, they were not ready to cope with career decision-making tasks that would allow them to assess appropriate careers for themselves. Traditional vocational test batteries are not always applicable for students with LD. Biller recommends training to address these areas beginning at the high school level. Counselors, teachers, and other staff members can ensure that the skills needed for success in college are incorporated in the secondary educational setting. Parents can further these skills by encouraging generalization into the home environment.

An appropriate starting point for successful transition planning is an honest assessment by the students, their parents, and teachers in regard to the four areas described above (academic, social, emotional/self-esteem, and self-help/survival). Some students and parents may need to have these skills explained and identified in order to begin the assessment process.

If student and their parents view college as a goal, they may need additional information on the demands of college. Frank discussions of college and how it is different from high school is necessary in order to help students have a more realistic view of expectations. Parents and students may need assistance in comparing the student's expectations with the students' skill proficiency and the demands of a college setting. Goals clarification discussions such as these help to lay a solid foundation that will allow for a smoother transition from high school to college.

Students with LD who plan to go to college should enroll in as many regular education classes as possible. They should strive to achieve the same objectives that are set for all students planning to attend college. Modifications to content should be made only when necessary. To facilitate this, it is important for special educators and counselors to foster and maintain a good relationship with general educators who have a history of working well with students with special needs.

Students with LD should be strongly encouraged to gradually internalize coping skills frequently taught and used thorough secondary special education programs. Independence and organization can be fostered by teaching students to use day planners, assignment folders or notebooks and/or long term assignment tables. Counselors may find regular group sessions covering such topics as how to appropriately interact with authority figures, dating skills, and friendship skills of benefit to high school students. Various other educational strategies may be incorporated as well, dependent upon the original assessment of the students' strengths and weaknesses.

As students approach their junior and senior years, additional issues need to be addressed. Counselors should provide assistance to students with LD as they investigate programs at local colleges and universities. Students and their parents need to be aware of differences in entrance requirements and programs for students with LD at various colleges in

order to make appropriate selections. Additionally, these final secondary years need to include training in self-advocacy. Students who are unable to assess their own needs and verbalize them will not be effective in accessing programs that may meet those needs. Further, they may need to be made aware of their rights as individuals with disabilities in order to effectively use the system designed to help them.

Resource Information

There are many resources on postsecondary options for students with learning disabilities available to professionals. One helpful aid teachers and counselors might use is *Tools for Transition* (Aune & Ness, 1991), a curriculum designed to assist professionals in preparing students with learning disabilities for transition into postsecondary settings. The curriculum includes identifying strengths and weaknesses, identifying learning styles, using study strategies, self-advocacy, and choosing postsecondary options.

The Educational Planning Strategy (I-Plan) (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker & Deshler, 1987; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990) has proven useful in helping many students with learning problems achieve self-advocacy skills. The goal of the strategy is to provide students with the skills to participate in decision-making conferences concerning them. The educational planning strategy can be taught by counselors, special education teachers, regular classroom teachers, and other professionals who are involved in the education of adolescents with special needs.

Professional and support organizations, such as the Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) and the Association of Learning Disabled Adults (ALDA), can provide information on a variety of topics concerning learning disabilities and transition. They also provide support to individuals with learning disabilities and their families.

The HEATH Resource Center operates a national clearinghouse on postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities. It can provide useful information on educational support services, policies, procedures, adaptations, and opportunities in postsecondary settings (i.e., colleges, vocational-technical schools, and independent living centers).

Books such as *College Students with Learning Disabilities* (Mangrum & Strichart, 1988), *Unlocking Potential: College and Other Choices for Learning Disabled People* (Scheiber & Talpers, 1987), and *Peterson's Guide to Colleges with Programs for Learning Disabled Students* (Mangrum & Strichart, 1985) may also be helpful resources. In addition, some states have published resources on postsecondary options for students with learning disabilities within their state.

Transition in Rural Settings

The transition needs of students with learning disabilities in rural settings probably do not differ significantly from the needs of students in urban and suburban settings. Students will need to develop skills that include those in the academic areas, social areas, emotional/self-esteem areas, and self-help/survival skills areas.

School staff in rural schools, however may have different advantages and disadvantages in programmatic provisions for secondary students with LD. Often smaller rural communities, where teachers and families live near one another, allow school staff access to knowledge of family characteristics and resources. As has been noted, accurate assessment of student and parent expectations is necessary in order to plan appropriate and realistic goals for the students. Proximity may allow school staff a more holistic view of their students. There may be informal opportunities in social settings outside of the school system that allow teachers and counselors to assist and influence their students' generalization of skills to the home environment. Teachers in small districts often teach multiple subjects or perform in more than one role. This flexibility may heighten the awareness of general educators of the need to make accommodation for students with learning disabilities.

Disadvantages exist in some areas of rural transition opportunities as well. First, there may not be an awareness of the opportunities available to students with LD at the postsecondary level. Second, there may be fewer opportunities for students to become aware of the wide variety of professional or business options available to them. There may also be less variety in course selection at the secondary level making it more difficult to provide a match between the needs of individual student and the general education curriculum. Similarly, there may be fewer teachers in the school system, thereby, limiting the opportunity to choose and foster general educators who have interests and abilities in working with special needs populations. Programs and materials such as the *Transition Implementation Guide* (Boyer & Arden, 1992) and the *Rural-Based Transition Model for Students with Learning Disabilities* (Rojewski, 1989) may assist rural schools in building a comprehensive transition program.

Summary

Special and general educators, counselors and parents can play a major role in preparing the student with LD for a successful college career. Students must first be encouraged to assess their academic, social, emotional/self-esteem, and self-help/survival skills. Their strengths and weaknesses in these skill areas should be matched with their goals. An appropriate educational and transition plan can then be formulated.

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